THE BUSH ADMINISTRATION is gunning for abortion rights.

BUT ACCESS to abortion for young, poor and working-class women has been severely eroded ever since the *Roe v. Wade* decision made abortion legal in 1973.

A NEW MOVEMENT that takes to the streets and demands the right of women to control their own bodies—the same tactics that won and saved abortion in the past—is in the making.

HERE ARE LESSONS learned from earlier struggles that are crucial for a new generation of pro-choice activists.

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Published by the International Socialist Organization

Abortion Rights:

LESSONS FOR A NEW STRUGGLE

by SHERRY WOLF, SHARON SMITH and ELIZABETH SCHULTE

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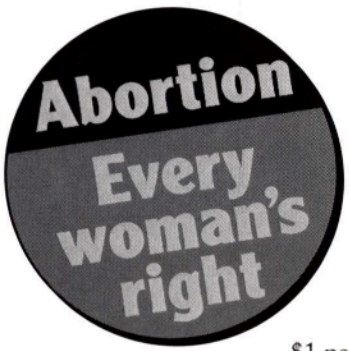

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The Bush Challenge

"I will do everything in my power to restrict abortions."

—George W. Bush

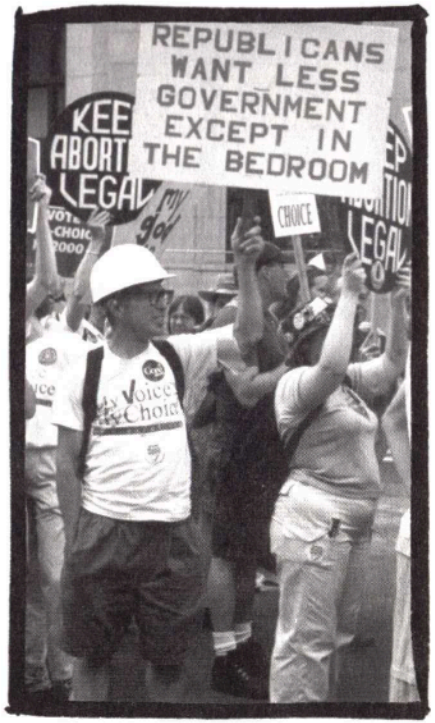
JUST 48 HOURS after taking the oath of office, President George W. Bush attacked some of the world's poorest and most vulnerable women. Bush used the 28th anniversary of *Roe v. Wade*, the Supreme Court decision that legalized abortion, to impose a gag rule on discussing abortion at all international agencies receiving U.S. funding.

As one *New York Times* columnist put it, "There, in the name of life, he imposed a policy that will produce more death: terrible death."[1]

According to the World Health Organization, millions of women around the world are forced to risk their lives and health to end an unwanted pregnancy. Every day, 55,000 unsafe abortions take place—95 percent of them in poor countries—and lead to the deaths of more than 200 women daily. Globally, one unsafe abortion takes place for every seven births. This global gag rule guarantees that many more deaths will result when desperate women inevitably seek unsafe and illegal abortions.

Bush betrayed his own ignorance of the law when he justified this act by claiming that American taxes should not go to provide abortions. Since 1973, no U.S. funds have been allowed for abortions abroad. But these agencies do provide urgently needed services—including medical information about how and where to get an abortion—to millions of women, many of whom are infected with AIDS and have nowhere else to turn.

By reviving Ronald Reagan's (and his father's) old gag rule, Bush Junior hoped to cocoon himself safely in their conservative legacy and give a nod to the right-wingers who helped him steal the 2000 election. This illegitimate president—who droned on about unity after disenfranchising thousands of Black Florida voters and losing the popular vote—has exposed the hollowness of his "compassionate conservatism."



This act came swiftly on the heels of his pre-inaugural announcement that John Ashcroft would be his choice for attorney general. Ashcroft is an arch right-winger—so racist that he is on record as opposing even voluntary school desegregation. As Attorney General of Missouri, Ashcroft tried to impose life imprisonment on women for some types of abortion. Now Ashcroft is installed as head of the Justice Department—the nation's most powerful lawyer in charge of safeguarding the rights of us all. A chilling thought.

Bush didn't stop there. He has announced that he wants the Food and Drug Administration to re-examine its approval of RU-486 (mifepristone), a safe drug that terminates pregnancies of up to seven weeks' duration. More than 800,000 European women have safely used this drug over the last 15 years.[2]

And Bush's attack on abortion extends to the legal right to choose. He has signaled his willingness to reverse the Supreme Court's landmark *Roe v. Wade* decision, announcing that he will consider asking Ashcroft's Justice Department to argue for a change in the law. "I've always said that *Roe v. Wade* was a judicial reach," Bush told NBC news on January 22, 2001.

Bush's strategy in the early weeks of his presidency was to launch a frontal assault on all things liberal in order to sideline the opposition and set the tone for the next four years. The Democra-

tic leadership in Congress handed Ashcroft his confirmation—refusing to filibuster his nomination even though they had more than the 41 votes required to do so. By adopting such a weak-kneed approach, Democrats allowed the Bush administration to gain the upper hand—even though Democrats now hold half the seats in the Senate.

And national pro-choice organizations, which during previous Republican administrations had rallied hundreds of thousands to protect a woman's right to choose, all but abandoned activism during Clinton's presidency. This left them ill-prepared to launch a strong fightback against Bush's massive attack on abortion rights immediately upon taking office.

As a result, Bush's presidency has brought a pervasive sense of fear and disorientation among many ordinary people who do not support Bush's right-wing agenda. But on virtually every issue—from tax cuts to school vouchers to abortion rights—the majority of the population stands far to the left of George W. Bush. A Gallup poll taken in October 2000 showed that 67 percent of Americans still support the *Roe v. Wade* decision. Bush has no mandate for imposing his right-wing program—he didn't even win the popular vote! We can stop him by fighting back.

There are already real signs of defiance. For the first time in 40 years, tens of thousands showed up to protest a new president's inauguration festivities. Thousands rallied with civil rights leaders around the Supreme Court and along the parade route. Thousands more demonstrated in San Francisco; Austin, Texas; Tallahassee, Florida, and elsewhere.

Since the anti-globalization protests in Seattle in late 1999, resistance to the status quo has expressed itself on the streets of many American cities. The recent revival of activism—from opposition to the racist Confederate flag to protests against the U.S. military training of death squads in Latin America—can be a potent force in the struggle for abortion rights.

And struggle we must. Long before Bush ever entered office, the ability for women to control their own bodies had been steadily eroded. Democratic Party officials, including Bill Clinton, along with many leaders of liberal organizations, have not just stood by while abortion rights were whittled away. In some instances, they were complicit. Not since the days before abortion was legal have reproductive rights been more restricted. Today, in 86 percent of U.S. counties, there are no doctors or clinics to provide a safe and legal abortion.[3]

The National Organization for Women (NOW) has called for an "Emergency Campaign to Defend Women's Lives," which holds the potential to launch a new grass-roots fightback against Bush's attacks. The pro-choice movement must mobilize to defend women's abortion rights now—not by looking to Democratic Party politicians, but by taking to the streets and building a protest movement.

But if we are to regroup our forces and mobilize to win back safe, legal and accessible abortion, we need to understand why and how we got here. More than ever, we need also to understand how and why legal abortion was won in the first place.

Why We Must Defend Legal Abortion

EACH YEAR, more than one and a half million women have abortions in the U.S. Forty-three percent of American women will have had an abortion by the time they are 45.[4] A generation of women has grown up relying on their ability to have access to a safe and legal abortion—a procedure that physicians agree is the medical equivalent of a tonsillectomy.

Whether or not abortion is a legal right, women will continue to have abortions—even if it means attempting self-inflicted abortions or seeking out back-alley illegal abortionists. Estimates are that in the years leading up to 1973, when abortion was legalized in the U.S., more than one million women sought illegal abortions each year.

Illegal abortions are expensive and humiliating for women—often performed without anesthesia and in unsanitary conditions.

But most importantly, illegal abortions are extremely dangerous. Women desperate to end a pregnancy use harsh chemicals or coat hangers to attempt self-inflicted abortion. Back-alley abortions often result in massive hemorrhaging and infection as women delay medical treatment for fear of criminal charges.

Large numbers of women die when abortion is illegal—80,000 each year according to the World Health Organization. The death toll in the century when abortion was illegal in the U.S. is unknown, but the number is certainly large—some estimates are as high as 10,000 each year. A University of Colorado study done in the late 1950s reported that yearly, 350,000 women experienced postoperative complications from illegal abortions in the United States.[5]

Terrified women who sought abortions did so in the utmost secrecy. To avoid police detection, women were often blindfolded and taken to an unknown location where the procedure would be performed with unknown results. One woman recalled a fellow student from a Southern college who had an illegal abortion: "She was too frightened to tell anyone what she had done. So when she developed complications, she tried to take care of it herself. She locked herself in the bathroom between two dorm rooms and quietly bled to death."[6]

These horrifying conditions explain why most women considered the Supreme Court's 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision, which legalized abortion in the U.S., a victory for women's rights.

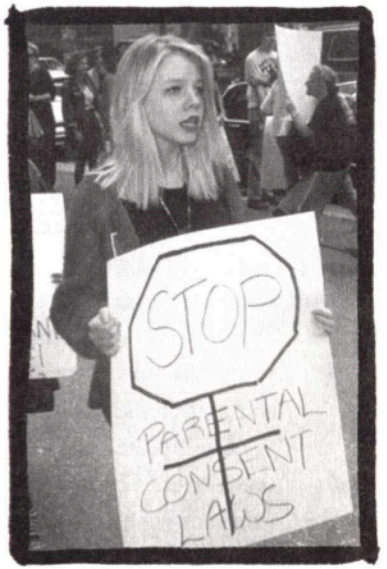
Many adult women remember the days when abortion was illegal. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that a clear majority of the population continues to support women's right to legal abortion.

Safe, legal and accessible abortion—the right to choose to end an unwanted pregnancy—is central to women's control over their own bodies and reproductive lives. No one else should have this control—not the church, state, husband, parents or boyfriend. The reason for this is simple: women must bear the emotional and physical trauma—and ultimately the financial burden—of carrying an unwanted pregnancy to term.

This is particularly important in a society like the one we live in today. Women, particularly single mothers, bear the bulk of responsibility for raising children, at wages much lower than men's.

Thus, women's right to control their own bodies is a prerequisite for women's liberation. Unless women have this control, they cannot be the equals of men in society. That's why abortion was a key demand of the women's liberation movement of the late 1960s, and, in the face of increasing attacks, could well become the center of the struggle for women's rights in the coming period.

The Erosion of Abortion Rights



THE NUMBER of restrictions on women's right to abortion is staggering. Forty-two states require that a minor obtain the consent of at least one parent prior to an abortion. Nineteen states now have a mandatory waiting period of anywhere from 24 to 72 hours between when a woman first consults a provider in person about an abortion and when she is allowed to have it performed.

Mandatory waiting periods, during which women are exposed to state-sponsored anti-abortion propaganda, were upheld in the 1992 *Planned Parenthood v. Casey* decision. It was then that the Supreme Court's first female justice, Reagan appointee Sandra Day O'Connor, introduced the concept of "undue burden." In defiance of all rational thought, O'Connor insisted that waiting periods did not constitute an "undue burden" on the young, the poor and those traveling from rural areas. Of course, they did impose burdens, and still do.

In 15 states, there is a gag rule whereby certain state employees and organizations receiving state funds are prevented from counseling or referring women for abortions. In Kentucky, the law explicitly prohibits emergency room personnel treating sexual assault victims from counseling or referring for abortion.[7]

Only 18 states fund abortion for poor women in all or most circumstances. Mississippi and South Dakota laws violate federal law by preventing funding for poor women who are victims of rape

and incest.[8] The list of cruelties goes on.

Many women are unaware of the extent to which the right to choose has been eroded. They learn of their own state's restrictions only when they find themselves in need of an abortion.

Michelle Lee, a 27-year-old Louisiana woman with a severe heart problem, tried to get a federally funded abortion in 1999. After her second child was born, doctors cautioned Lee that she might not survive another pregnancy because of a heart condition for which she was awaiting a transplant. When she became pregnant after her birth control failed, Lee became terribly weak. She sought an emergency abortion at the Louisiana State Medical Center, but doctors refused, maintaining that she had a 50 percent chance of surviving the pregnancy. Lee was forced to travel out of state to get an abortion.[9]

How did women's right to abortion get eroded so severely? How has this right—so fundamental to women's liberation—come to hang in the balance?

The blame rests squarely with the right-wing coalition, spearheaded by the Christian Right, that has conducted an unrelenting attack on women's and gay rights for more than two decades in the name of "family values." But responsibility also falls on abortion's traditional supporters—liberal women's organizations and Democratic Party politicians—for their weak, or sometimes non-existent, defense of abortion against the right's attacks, particularly over the last decade.

The Anti-Abortion Zealots

THE CHRISTIAN right's strategy of chiseling away at abortion step by step, state by state, has yielded tremendous gains. As Christian Coalition founder Pat Robertson put it, "A strategic, incremental goal is much more effective." The anti-abortion movement has two wings: activist fanatics and legislators.

Beginning in the 1980s, the activist wing of the anti-abortion movement focussed on harassment and physical attacks on abortion clinics and providers. Their goal was to use threats, violence and intimidation to scare staff and patients from entering the clinics. One group compiled a "hit list" of abortion providers, put it on the Internet, named it the "Nuremberg Files" (named after the city where Nazi war criminals were tried), and carefully crossed out abortion providers' names as they were murdered.

Damage from the Atlanta explosion that blinded Emily Lyons in 1998

One anti-abortion fanatic fatally shot Dr. Bernard Slepian, an abortion doctor near Buffalo, New York, while Slepian stood in his kitchen with his family. That same year, 1998, Emily Lyons, an Atlanta women's health clinic nurse, was blinded when an anti-abortionist's bomb exploded outside the clinic where she worked. It was one of dozens of clinic bombings over the last decade.

While many Republican politicians tried to distance themselves from the Christian Right during the last election, their policies have encouraged the anti-abortion movement for the last two decades.

In the 1980s anti-abortion groups such as the Right to Life and, later, Randall Terry's Operation Rescue concentrated their efforts on harassing clinic staff and patients and blockading clinics to physically prevent women from entering. Meanwhile, the White House provided cover for the anti-abortionists. President Ronald Reagan gave congratulatory speeches to anti-abortion groups and remained silent on the issue of clinic bombings.

President George Bush (the first) encouraged the clinic violence by intervening on behalf of the fanatics. In 1991, when a federal judge ordered Operation Rescue to stop its picketing in Wichita, Kansas, after three clinics had been shut down, the Bush administration intervened, arguing that the judge had no authority to issue the order.

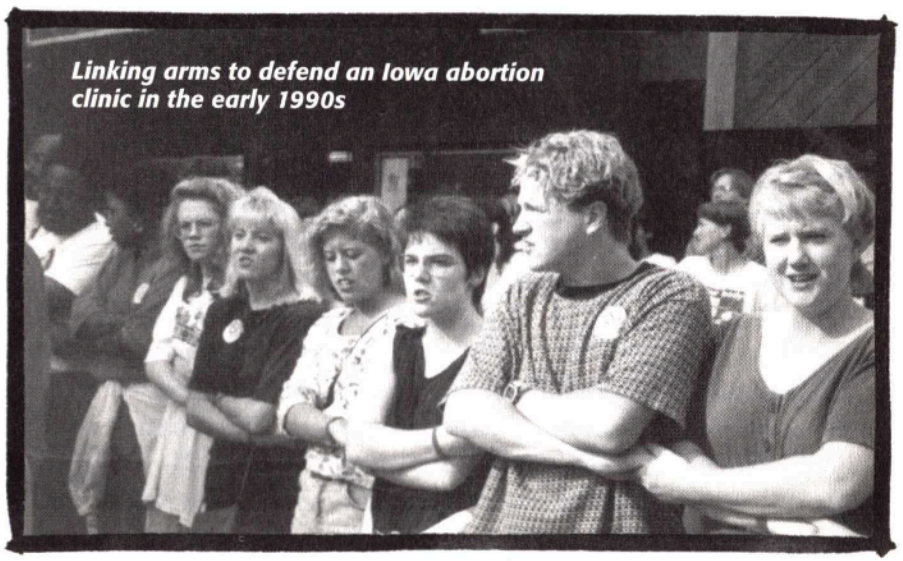
Many abortion rights supporters, recognizing the immediate threat to women's right to choose, turned toward activism at that point. In 1989, when abortion opponents came within one

Supreme Court vote of overturning *Roe v. Wade* with the case of *Webster v. Reproductive Health Services,* hundreds of thousands of abortion rights supporters traveled to Washington, D.C., to demonstrate in favor of women's right to choose.

Abortion rights supporters also came to understand that they had to defend the clinics themselves if they were to keep them open against the bigots' attacks. Thousands of women and men traveled to Buffalo, N.Y., in 1992 to make sure that Operation Rescue couldn't shut down the clinics as they had in Wichita the year before. Despite freezing rain, abortion rights activists outnumbered and outlasted Operation Rescue, which was forced to turn tail and leave Buffalo.

By mobilizing the pro-choice majority, the pro-abortion movement was able to demoralize the anti-abortion zealots. When anti-choice bigots tried to organize an anniversary rescue in Buffalo in 1999, they were hardly able to muster a dozen supporters. And extremist attacks, such as clinic bombings or shootings of abortion providers, are acts of desperation not strength. While abortion rights supporters should take these incidents seriously, it would be wrong to interpret these attacks as a sign of strength or the growth of forces on the right. On the contrary, these acts are recognition that the extreme right wing's side has splintered.

The declining strength of the religious right explains why George W. Bush took such pains to distance himself from it



Linking arms to defend an Iowa abortion clinic in the early 1990s

during the election. Not wanting to scare off the majority of people who are still pro-choice, Bush even showcased pro-choice Republicans at the convention and has picked a few to serve on his cabinet. Once safely in office, however, the "compassionate conservative" launched an attack on abortion rights.

Legislative Attacks

THE MOST significant attacks on abortion rights haven't come from the extremist fringe of the right wing. They've come from lawmakers.

Almost immediately after *Roe v. Wade*, abortion opponents set out to destroy it. Anti-abortion Congressman Henry Hyde (R-Ill.) admitted that his forces wouldn't be able to get rid of *Roe v. Wade* altogether, so they would have to pass legislation state by state to chip away at a woman's right to abortion one piece at a time.

Hyde's 1977 amendment that denies federal funding to poor women for abortions, except in the case in which the woman's life is in imminent danger, has been voted and approved on each year since. Congress has only allowed for minor modifications to the Hyde Amendment to include exceptions for "promptly reported" rape or incest.

States have enacted 262 anti-choice measures over the past six years.[10] During the last few years, Republican state and congressional legislators have concentrated their efforts on passing bans on so-called "partial-birth" abortions. Anti-abortion politicians like Hyde hope that they can gain support for these bans by showing bloody photographs, calling the late-term procedures "infanticide" and claiming that during the procedure the "infant" is "killed" when it is "partially born."

First of all, there is no such thing as "partial birth" abortion. This is a term abortion opponents invented to give the false impression that fetuses aborted by intact dilation and extraction—the medical name for this late-term procedure—could survive outside the womb. "Partial birth" is not a medical term, yet it appears in legislation banning a medical procedure.

Second, the right wing often vilifies women who seek late-term

abortion procedures as irresponsible and selfish. But the reality is that this procedure is extremely rare and is normally used in cases when a woman's life is in danger or a fetus is severely deformed—late in pregnancy when a woman must make a serious and often difficult decision.

In 2000, the Supreme Court ruled in *Stenberg v. Carhart* that 29 state laws aimed at preventing intact dilation and extraction were both unconstitutional and unenforceable. These laws were so vaguely worded that they could include almost any abortion procedure. Wisconsin and Missouri clinics were forced to close down entirely while awaiting a ruling. When both houses of Congress passed an amendment to outlaw late-term abortions entirely, President Clinton vetoed the bill. But not because he took some principled stance on women's right to choose—only because no provisions were made in the case of rape, incest or life-threatening circumstances. Otherwise, he said he would support the ban.

Abortion supporters should not support a ban on any abortion procedure. Each and every restriction on legal abortion further erodes women's control over their own reproductive lives. No third party should be allowed to interfere with the decision reached between a woman and her doctor as to which abortion procedure is best for her. Passing even one restriction strengthens the idea that women shouldn't be allowed to make this decision by themselves—even though they must live with the consequences of an unwanted or dangerous pregnancy.

The "Fetal Rights and Viability" Lies

LEGISLATURES ARE trying to establish the groundwork to overturn *Roe v. Wade* by enacting laws granting enhanced legal rights to the fetus. Meanwhile, they are subjecting pregnant women to extraordinary punishments for conduct already prohibited, such as drug use.

"In July 1989, Jennifer Clarise Johnson, a 23-year-old crack addict, became the first woman in the United States to be criminally convicted for exposing her baby to drugs while pregnant... The prosecution obtained Johnson's conviction for passing a cocaine metabolite from her body to her newborn infant's during the 60-second period after birth and before the umbilical cord was cut."[11]

A woman cannot enter a bar or take a sip of beer without seeing warning signs and labels reminding her that the state has reduced women's pregnant bodies to carriers for the next generation.

Discussions of "fetal rights" in themselves are abstract because fetuses don't exist independently of the women who carry them. Real, living, breathing women are the ones whose rights are at issue. All attempts to disconnect the real lives of women from the fate of their fetuses inevitably denigrate women.

Fetal protection legislation could also be used to prohibit the use of fetal tissue in research—a use that scientists argue has been instrumental to recent advances in Parkinson's disease and multiple sclerosis. President Bush has already stated that he will seek such a ban in order to promote alleged "fetal interests." Aside from the clear advantage to be gained from research on fetal tissue, this debate aims to shift the focus away from women's rights to the supposed "rights of the fetus."

Another set of restrictions involves the issue of fetal viability—the point at which a fetus can survive outside the womb. Anti-abortion propaganda, accepted by much of the mainstream media, claims the age of fetal viability has crept closer and closer to the moment of conception, thanks to significant strides in medical technology.

Yet the scientific and medical community maintains that the earliest age of viability remains exactly where it has been for some years—at 24-26 weeks. Nevertheless, the Supreme Court's *Webster* ruling allows states to require viability tests at a much earlier stage in fetal development—20 weeks.

The tests add expensive charges and unnecessary inconvenience for the woman. Moreover, the testing could delay an abortion by two or three weeks, at a stage where such a delay could triple the cost of the procedure. Despite all claims to the contrary, the 20-week viability testing upheld by *Webster* serves as little more than a public relations purpose: more than 98 percent of abortions take place before the end of the twentieth week of pregnancy.[12]

Abortion and Morality

DESPITE THE fact that religious leaders and politicians speak of abortion as an amoral crime against age-old values, it is really structural changes in the economy and women's lives that have played key roles in determining the "sinfulness" and legality of abortion.

Abortion only became illegal in the mid-nineteenth century. Until that time, early abortions were widespread and legal. Abortions before "quickening" (fetal movement in about the fourth month of pregnancy) were socially acceptable for many centuries as a means of controlling fertility.

Moreover, contrary to anti-abortionists' claims, there is no general agreement among different religious faiths over the morality of abortion. While the Catholic Church, along with various fundamentalist Protestant organizations, form the backbone of the anti-abortion movement, 45 other religious organizations are actively pro-choice. In 1971, the Clergy Consultation Service, an organization of 1,200 Protestant ministers and Jewish rabbis, set up an abortion referral service that helped thousands of women to travel to New York City to obtain abortions before the *Roe v. Wade* decision in 1973.[13]

Nor has the Catholic Church always opposed abortion. It wasn't until 1869, when Pope Pius IX reworked the teaching on abortion, that the Church first demanded excommunication from anyone who aborted a pregnancy.[14] And surveys show that, despite the Catholic Church's opposition, both birth control and abortion rates are similar among Catholics to the rest of the population.

The introduction of anti-abortion legislation beginning in the mid-nineteenth century—not to mention the Catholic Church's new-found opposition—was rooted in the needs of a rapidly industrializing economy. Between 1870 and 1929, the output of U.S. industry increased by 14 times.[15] This created a tremendous demand for new labor. To this end, the U.S. both opened its doors to mass immigration and simultaneously promoted high birth rates among U.S. women. Anti-abortion legislation spread to all 50 states. At the same time, textbooks and magazines were flooded with "expert" opinion expounding on women's natural preference for full-time motherhood.

But as the twentieth century progressed, capitalism no longer needed women primarily in the home. After the Second World War, higher American living standards meant lower infant mortality, reducing the need for larger families. Furthermore, improvements in birth control methods—especially the introduction of the pill in the 1960s—allowed women more control in limiting pregnancy. Women thus became more desirable as workers to individual employers. The trend since the mid-twentieth century has been for women to serve as a lower-paid section of the labor force—in addition to raising children.

Women carry a double burden in modern capitalism. The system needs women to be both homemakers and workers. Most working mothers actually have two jobs: a paid job, and the other, unpaid, in the home.

The split in the ruling class over the issue of abortion reflects these contradictory roles that women fulfill. The pro-family ideology and ravings of right-wingers play an important role in whipping up support for the nuclear family, and women's role within it.

Still, women workers' control over pregnancy is necessary to maintain a stable workforce of lower-paid women workers. On this basis, it is in individual bosses' interests to limit pregnancy. Hence the support for legal abortion.

How Legal Abortion Was Won

IN 1950, some 33 percent of women worked outside the home. By 1970, the figure was 44 percent, and by 1999 it had jumped to 64.5 percent.[16] Moreover, with the need for managers and skilled professionals rising, the doors to higher education finally opened to women on a large scale—and middle-class women began to flock to universities across the country.

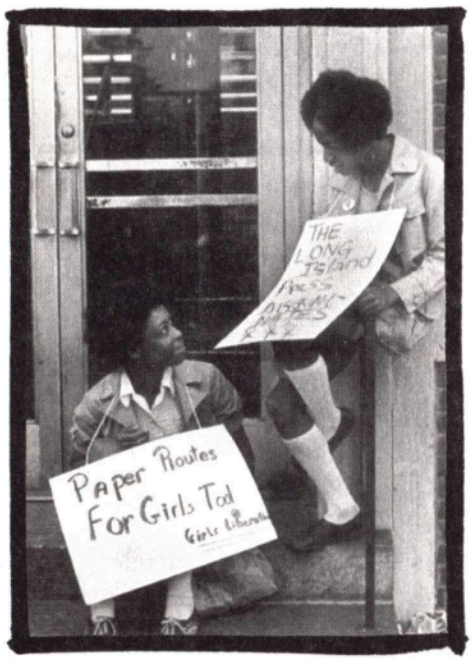
Expectations soared, particularly for middle-class women, that university education would lead to a high-status professional career. But most of these expectations were unfulfilled. Women college graduates entered the corporate world only to find new

doors slammed in their faces, as they faced sexist attitudes and limited opportunities for women professionals.

But by the middle of the 1960s, the apex of the post-World War Two economic boom, the U.S. entered a period of social upheaval. Blacks organized in large numbers to demand an end to segregation and the right to equal economic opportunities denied them. Against the backdrop of an escalating U.S. presence in Vietnam, the civil rights movement peaked, followed by the more radical Black liberation movement. Inspired by the Black movement, the anti-Vietnam war movement spread to campuses across the country. Demonstrations and occupations became increasingly bitter, many involving violent exchanges with the police.

It was also in the mid-60s that the women's movement began to emerge, as middle-class women started to look for a way to raise demands for equal opportunity. To this end the National Organization for Women (NOW) was formed in 1966. By 1974, NOW's membership totaled more than 40,000 nationally.[17]

On college campuses, a more radical version of the women's movement was thrown up, initially organized by activists from the civil rights and anti-war movements. Consciously imitating the Black movement, young women students organized around the demand for women's liberation. The new women's liberation groups began meeting in 1967. By 1969, groups had been established in more than 40 cities across the United States.



The wider struggle for equality: Girls on Long Island demand access to jobs as newspaper carriers, 1971

The women's movement never reached the massive size of the civil rights movement, but at times it organized protests that involved many thousands. On August 26, 1970, the women's movement called for a national day of action, a Women's Strike for Equality. It brought more than 50,000 women out to demonstrate for women's rights across the country. These demonstrations also called for free abortion on demand. Literally hundreds of local protests took place between 1969 and 1973 in favor of legal abortion.

But more important than the actual numbers drawn into the movement itself, the ideas of women's liberation found a much larger audience in the population at large. The effects of the women's movement were far-reaching in raising the consciousness and expectations of millions of women workers. It brought the issues of equal pay, child care and abortion rights into the national limelight. By 1976, a Harris survey reported that 63 percent of American women supported "efforts to strengthen and change women's status in society."[18]

The movement's determination and the increasing popularity of its demands meant that the anti-abortion platform of then-President Richard Nixon could not prevent abortion's legalization in 1973. The persistence of the movement—along with the leftward shift in the general political climate—pushed the political balance in favor of abortion.

In fact, Nixon's position was similar to George W. Bush's. In 1971, Nixon declared, "From personal and religious beliefs, I consider abortion an unacceptable form of population control. Further, unrestricted abortion policies, or abortion on demand, I cannot square with my personal belief in the sanctity of human life—including the life of the yet unborn."[19]

To this statement, the New York Women's Strike Coalition responded, "We will grant Mr. Nixon the freedom to take care of his uterus if he will let us take care of ours."[20]

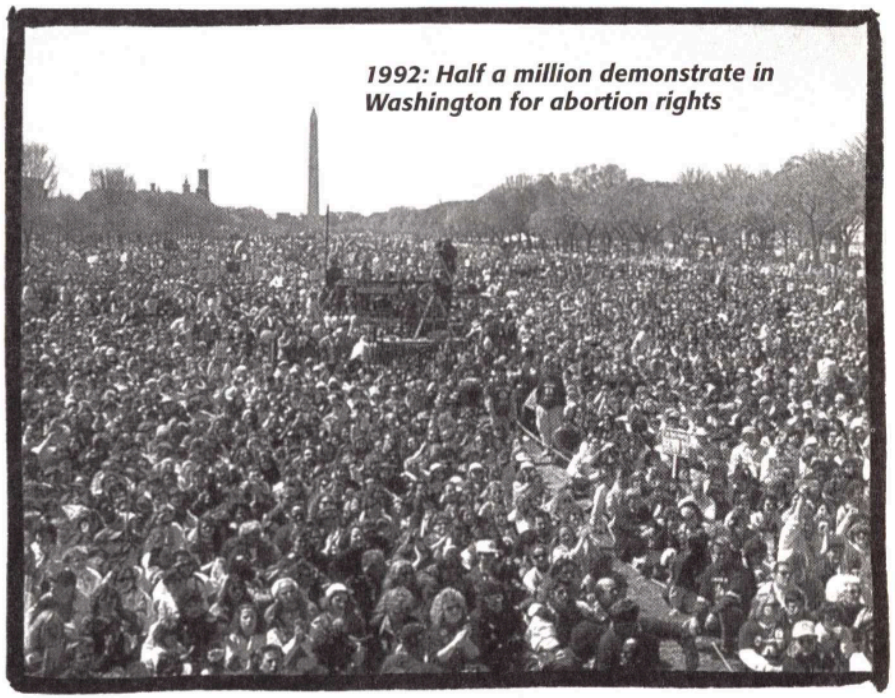
Finally, on January 22, 1973, the Supreme Court ruled on the *Roe v. Wade* case which declared legal abortion constitutional. This moment was undoubtedly the high point of the women's movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

But what happened to the movement since 1973 has highlighted the weaknesses of the women's movement to continue to defend abortion rights once they came under attack by conservatives.

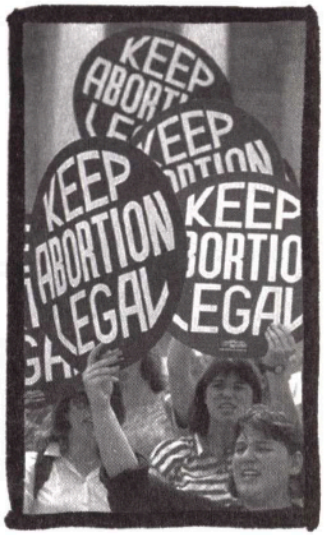
The Failure of the Electoral Strategy

THE IDEAS of women's liberation attracted large numbers of women—yet mainstream feminist organizations like NOW and Planned Parenthood have always dominated the women's movement. And mainstream feminism has maintained a primarily electoral strategy for reform—a strategy that relies on campaigning to elect sympathetic politicians into office and on lobbying efforts to win legislation. This strategy has proven disastrous for abortion rights.

Occasionally, mainstream feminist organizations have mobilized their members to protest—in demonstrations that have, by and large, been enormously successful. For instance, when the Supreme Court considered overturning abortion rights in the 1989 *Webster* case, NOW mobilized a mass march on Washington, which drew hundreds of thousands. In 1992, NOW organized aother massive rally for choice that drew half a million to Washington. But after Clinton took office in 1993, no feminist organization called a national demonstration to defend women's right to abortion—even in the face of the widespread passage of bans on so-called partial birth abortions—throughout his presidency.



1992: Half a million demonstrate in Washington for abortion rights



The pro-choice movement supported Bill Clinton uncritically in the 1990s. The Reagan-Bush years had dealt terrible defeats to the labor movement, civil rights and women's rights movements. Desperate to sweep away that legacy, leaders of major women's organizations such as NOW and the National Abortion and Reproductive Rights Action League (NARAL) threw their uncritical support and vast amounts of money into Bill Clinton's presidential campaign in 1992.

But there were signs even then that Clinton was at best a fair-weather friend of women's right to choose. Evasive as usual, Clinton refused to take a position in a crucial fight for state funding of abortions while he was Arkansas governor in 1986. He abandoned women—many of them Black—to the back alleys in one of the nation's poorest states.

After Clinton sailed to victory—with massive pro-choice support—any chance of pressure or protest from these organizations vanished. Liberal women's organizations sat back and counted on Clinton to pass the Federal Freedom of Choice Act, which would have barred states from restricting abortion rights; to repeal the Hyde Amendment, the ban on federal funding of abortion for poor women; and to secure the coverage of abortions under his new national health care program. The message went out that all pro-choice activists had to do was wait for Clinton to protect and expand abortion rights.

But despite the fact that Democrats controlled both the House and the Senate as well as the White House for Clinton's first two years in office, none of these things happened.

In addition to all the restrictions on abortion rights mentioned

above, Clinton signed off on a "compromise" with congressional abortion opponents in November 1999 in which he agreed to a global gag rule—the same one Bush just signed—in exchange for the Republicans' promise to pay the one billion dollars in dues owed to the United Nations (UN). Clinton sent Secretary of State Madeleine Albright to sell the deal.

Al Gore defended Clinton's UN dues-for-abortion rights deal, arguing, "Facing the situation the president faced, it is understandable to me he made the decision he did."[21]

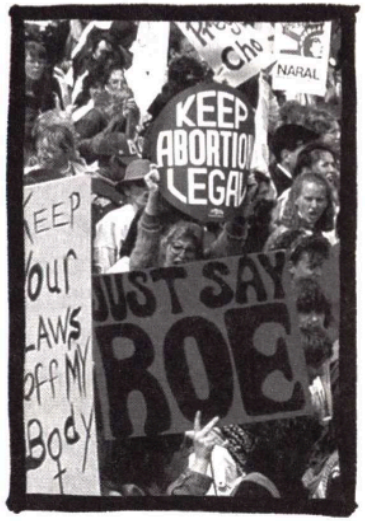
Gore, who posed as a long-time supporter of abortion during the 2000 election, voted to deny poor women funding throughout his years in Congress during the 1970s and 1980s.[22] Significantly, he chose Senator Joe Lieberman as his running mate, a man who has always supported parental consent legislation. That legislation led in 1988 to the death of 17-year-old Becky Bell, who died of a botched illegal abortion because, like thousands of others, she couldn't bring herself to tell her folks that she was pregnant.

Senate Minority Leader Tom Daschle (D-S.D.) reached a new low in Democratic Party complicity with anti-choice bigots in 1998. He made common cause with anti-choice Republicans when proposing a ban on *all* post-viability abortions, opening a new battleground in the abortion wars.[23]

The mainstream feminist strategy has been to elect pro-choice candidates and support them once in office—even if these candidates have sold out abortion and women's rights in the long run.

Sometimes, they have been willing to make huge concessions to get their candidate in office. For example, in the 1990 Georgia governor's race, NARAL and a local pro-abortion group refused to endorse former Atlanta mayor Andrew Young, a strong supporter of abortion rights, over the more conservative but "pro-choice" Democratic candidate, Zell Miller, who was sure to win. In 1997, then-Gov. Miller would sign off on a state ban on "partial-birth" abortion.

This policy of attacking solid pro-abortion candidates in defense of meek and even ambivalent ones reached a new low in the 2000 election. For the first time in generations, a candidate calling for universal health care—including fully funded abortion without exception—campaigned for president. Ralph Nader tapped into the widespread disgust with corporate greed and the betrayals of the Democrats.



Weeks before the election, when Nader was packing amphitheaters with thousands of rallying supporters and inspiring many more to organize, NOW launched a sleazy attack. In an interview with the *San Francisco Chronicle*, NOW's president, Patricia Ireland, accused Nader of being "ill-informed about abortion rights."[24] NOW bought airtime on major networks and paid for full-page ads in daily newspapers across the country to accuse Nader of not taking abortion seriously. But Nader's abortion policy was a carbon copy of NOW's. Nader's much too abbreviated response in interviews was to say that "abortion was a settled issue," but when pressed further he talked about the role of movements in securing the right to abortion and that a majority of Americans still support it.[25]

Instead, NOW threw its unwavering support behind Al Gore who, according to the *New York Times*, "compiled a more-than-respectable record with the National Right to Life Committee in the House"[26] during his eight years in Congress. Gore lost, partly because Bush—with the help of the Supreme Court—stole the election and partly due to a remarkably conservative and uninspiring campaign that alienated many progressives. After the election, NOW had the audacity—along with many other liberals—to blame Nader for Bush's victory.

NOW and the Democrats justified these attacks as they have always justified lesser evilism—whoever would be the next president would determine the composition of the Supreme Court. They ignore the fact that it was mass movements that pressured the Court to rule in favor of abortion rights in the past, not the political persuasions of individual Supreme Court justices.

What Moves the Supreme Court

IT IS no exaggeration to describe the U.S. Supreme Court today as a bastion of reaction. Women's right to abortion may be hanging by a thread—for the second time in a decade.

In 1989, the Supreme Court considered—and came within one vote of—overturning *Roe v. Wade*, the 1973 Court decision that made abortion legal, in its *Webster v. Reproductive Health Services* ruling.

There is no doubt that Bush would like nothing better than to tilt the balance against abortion—one of the few liberal rights still supported by a majority on the Court.

But a massive public outcry can help prevent him from getting away with it. A mass movement can also influence the political bent of the Supreme Court. Schools teach that the Supreme Court justices stand above the political fray—devoting themselves to strict interpretation of the Constitution, immune to pressure from outside the hallowed walls of the Court chambers. They are, in theory, part of the unique American system of "checks and balances" that keep the "executive branch" of the government from gaining too much power and becoming corrupted.

The Court's ruling in December 2000, which delivered the presidency to George W. Bush in the face of racism and mass voter disenfranchisement, laid that myth to rest once and for all. The majority's Republican Party cards were plain for all to see.

The Supreme Court is by nature a reactionary body. Appointed for life and treated like royalty, the justices exist to preserve the status quo. They institute reforms only when they see this status quo threatened by the possibility of revolt from below. And when they do, the political balance can change—often based on the actions of justices one least expects.

That is why it is wrong to think that the president determines the character of the Supreme Court. Kennedy appointee Byron White became an anti-abortion conservative. Meanwhile, Eisenhower appointee William Brennan and Nixon appointee Harry Blackmun became two of the Court's leading liberals. Blackmun actually wrote the Supreme Court's *Roe v. Wade* decision. And Bush appointee David Souter has demonstrated himself to be one of the more liberal of the current Supreme Court justices.

The best way to influence the Court is not indirectly, at the ballot box, but directly, through large-scale protest. In 1989, hundreds of thousands of pro-choice supporters came to Washington to demonstrate for abortion rights as pro-choice activists were facing off with anti-abortion zealots all across the country. Chief Justice William Rehnquist actually penned a decision in the *Webster* case overturning *Roe v. Wade*, assuming he held a majority. But Reagan appointee Sandra Day O'Connor ultimately swung the other way, saving the legal right to choose.

The power of social movements is enormous, and can shift the Supreme Court—no matter who sits in the White House.

Concessions to the Right

LEADERS OF the pro-abortion movement have conceded an enormous amount over the last decade. The very term "pro-abortion" has been jettisoned in favor of the more euphemistic term "pro-choice" out of fears of alienating moderates. Consumed with *appearing* non-threatening, the movement instead has *become* non-threatening.

To listen to some liberal feminist leaders, you might think you were talking to the other side.

When NARAL changed its name in 1994 from the National Abortion Rights Action League to the National Abortion and Reproductive Rights Action League, its president Kate Michelman announced, "We've spent the last 25 years leading the fight for one right—the right to choose abortion. We had to make that fight...Now we've got to begin leading the fight to make abortion less necessary."[27] Mary Wilder, NARAL's legal director, explained that "abortion rights must be promoted in a framework of morality and conscience."[28]

In January 2001, NARAL mailed out questionnaires throughout the country listing such things as "abstinence training" among the policies necessary to curb abortions. And on the cover of their

2001 edition of *Who Decides? A State-by-State Review of Abortion and Reproductive Rights*, NARAL proclaims its vision is "to make Americans feel proud and patriotic for being pro-choice."

During the 1977 congressional debate on banning intact dilation and extraction, the *New York Times* ran an op-ed piece by feminist author Naomi Wolf titled "Pro-Choice and Pro-Life." Wolf calls upon pro-choice activists to change their unapologetic language: "What if we called abortion what many believe it to be: a failure?...What if we call policies that sustain, tolerate and even guarantee the highest abortion rate of any industrialized nation what they should be called: crimes against women?"[29]

These retreats have not only helped pave the way for further erosion of abortion rights, but they have seriously confused abortion supporters. While leaders have retreated from the streets and compromised away women's right to choose, millions of abortion rights supporters have been disarmed by these conservative arguments.

In the aftermath of George W. Bush's election, there are real signs that the pro-choice movement is becoming reactivated—and none too soon. NOW's "Emergency Campaign to Defend Women's Lives," launched in spring 2001, can mark the beginning of a resurgence of pro-choice activism, with the potential to draw in the hundreds of thousands of pro-choice supporters angered by Bush's attacks. Such an activist movement—relying on the power of numbers rather than the empty promises of politicians—can not only stave off Bush's attacks, but restore badly-needed confidence to the pro-choice movement.

Women deserve the right to control their own bodies, without apology. We need a movement committed to fighting for this right.

Why Abortion Is a Class Issue

THOUGH ABORTION is generally posed as a "women's issue," it is also an issue of class. In fact, no matter what restrictions are placed on abortions, not all women suffer equally. Indeed, some women do not suffer at all. Class has always been the deciding factor in the right to choose an abortion.

Wealthy women can always afford access to abortion, even if it were to again become illegal. In the century during which abortion was illegal, rich women could still obtain abortions—they had the money to travel and the private physicians and connections necessary to get around the law. Those women most in need of abortions tend to be young and poor.

A 1983 Alan Guttmacher Institute study found that Medicaid-eligible women wait an average of two to three weeks longer than other women to have an abortion because of difficulties they have in obtaining the necessary funds. The cost of an abortion, of course, increases the longer a woman waits to have the procedure, exacerbating her difficulties. While the average cost of a first-trimester non-hospital abortion in 1997 was $316, the charge jumped to $618 at 16 weeks of gestation, and the charge more than tripled to $1,109 at 20 weeks. Such delays can also have health implications, because the risk of complications following an induced abortion increases as the procedure is done later in gestation.

The single most common reason why women choose to have abortions is economic—the inability to afford raising a child. Poor and working-class women account for the vast majority of abortions.

The economic consequences of racism also cannot be ignored in a country where a third of Blacks live below the poverty line. Black women and Latinas earn lower wages due to discrimination and therefore are in greater need of abortion services. They are also more likely to suffer from the lack of abortion services in 86 percent of American counties.

Before 1970, when abortion was legalized in New York City, Black women accounted for 50 percent and Puerto Rican women for 44 percent of all deaths due to illegal abortions.[30]

Restrictions on abortion rights since 1973 have mostly affected poor and working-class women—from the Hyde Amendment to waiting periods which impose a great burden on women who must take several days off work to get an abortion. It is no accident that the same politicians who oversaw the erosion of abortion rights in the last decade also presided over huge cuts to social services and a

Sterilization Abuse

"We don't allow dogs to breed. We spay them. We neuter them. We try to keep them from having unwanted puppies, and yet these women are literally having litters of children."

THIS RACIST tirade came from Barbara Harris, the founder of CRACK (Children Requiring a Caring Kommunity), based in California. CRACK's mission is to sterilize poor women—targeting Black and Latino neighborhoods—who have substance abuse problems. CRACK offers a $200 incentive to undergo sterilization—to women who are desperate and in need of treatment. They have opened chapters in Chicago and have plans for offices in Seattle, Minnesota, and Florida. Their advertisements read: "Don't let a pregnancy ruin your drug habit," and "If you use drugs, get birth control, get $200 cash."[33]

Sterilization abuse—whether forced physically or economically—is not a new method of controlling the lives of poor women. For decades it was a policy carried out by "family-planning" services and approved by the U.S. government in Puerto Rico.

After the United States gained control of the island of Puerto Rico from the Spanish in 1898, U.S. sugar interests set up large plantations condemning the vast majority of the population to earn their livelihood as poor, landless laborers.

Beginning in the 1940s, U.S. corporations began relocating manufacturing plants to Puerto Rico, to take advantage of cheap wages and tax incentives. As more corporations set up manufacturing facilities, business and government leaders collaborated to develop sterilization programs in order to use Puerto Rican women to fill the demand for cheap labor.

Sterilization was the preferred method because it ensured childbirth would not interrupt the participation of women workers in the workforce, and also because racist population control officials believed working-class Puerto Rican women were incapable of using contraceptives.

There was an added business incentive to sterilize these women: many of the plants that relocated to Puerto Rico were drug and chemical manufacturing facilities, which were extremely dangerous to pregnant women.

Together, the International Planned Parenthood Foundation, the U.S.-based population control program, and the Puerto Rican government conducted a massive sterilization campaign. Many women were not told that the operation was permanent. And most forms of birth control were either unavailable to most women or extremely expensive.

By 1968, one-third of all women of childbearing age had been sterilized in Puerto Rico.[34]

massive transfer of wealth from poor to rich.

Since Bill Clinton's 1996 welfare "reform" laws went into effect, women-led households were plunged into deeper poverty. In addition to gutting Aid to Families with Dependent Children, Clinton slashed $54 billion over six years from all kinds of programs—from food stamps to Supplementary Security Income for disabled children.[31]

"The 1980s was known as the 'Decade of Greed' because of the huge transfer of wealth from the poorest to the richest in the U.S. But it turns out that the greed was just beginning," writes *Socialist Worker* editor Alan Maass. "According to a study conducted jointly by the Institute for Policy Studies and United for a Fair Economy, compensation for top executives at America's biggest corporations increased at a rate of 50 percent a year during the 1990s. By contrast, after accounting for inflation, workers' wages rose at a rate of 1 percent a year for the decade. The resulting gap between the pay of top executives and the average factory worker is a staggering 419 to 1—10 times bigger than it was in 1980."[32]

The Socialist Case for Abortion

WE LIVE in a society of gross inequality. Capitalism cannot exist without it. Only 225 billionaires in the world own as much wealth as half the world's population. The oppression of the world's vast majority by a tiny ruling class has been crucial to securing this obscene inequality. And to keep this majority of ordinary working-class people divided, capitalism has created and relies upon certain division—racial, national and sexual divisions among them.

Women's oppression performs two important functions for the system. First, capitalism depends on women's unpaid labor in the family—housework and child care—as a cheap means of reproducing labor power for the system. Over the last century, in particular, capitalism has also come to rely on women as a lower-paid section of the labor force. Even college-educated women in the U.S. today earn only 73 cents for each dollar a man earns—a gap

that has gotten smaller over the years partially due to the fall of men's wages.[35]

Socialists believe that society does not have to be organized this way. All working-class people—regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation or national origin—face a common enemy and therefore have a common struggle. Class unity is central if women are to ever live in a society free of restrictions on their bodies.

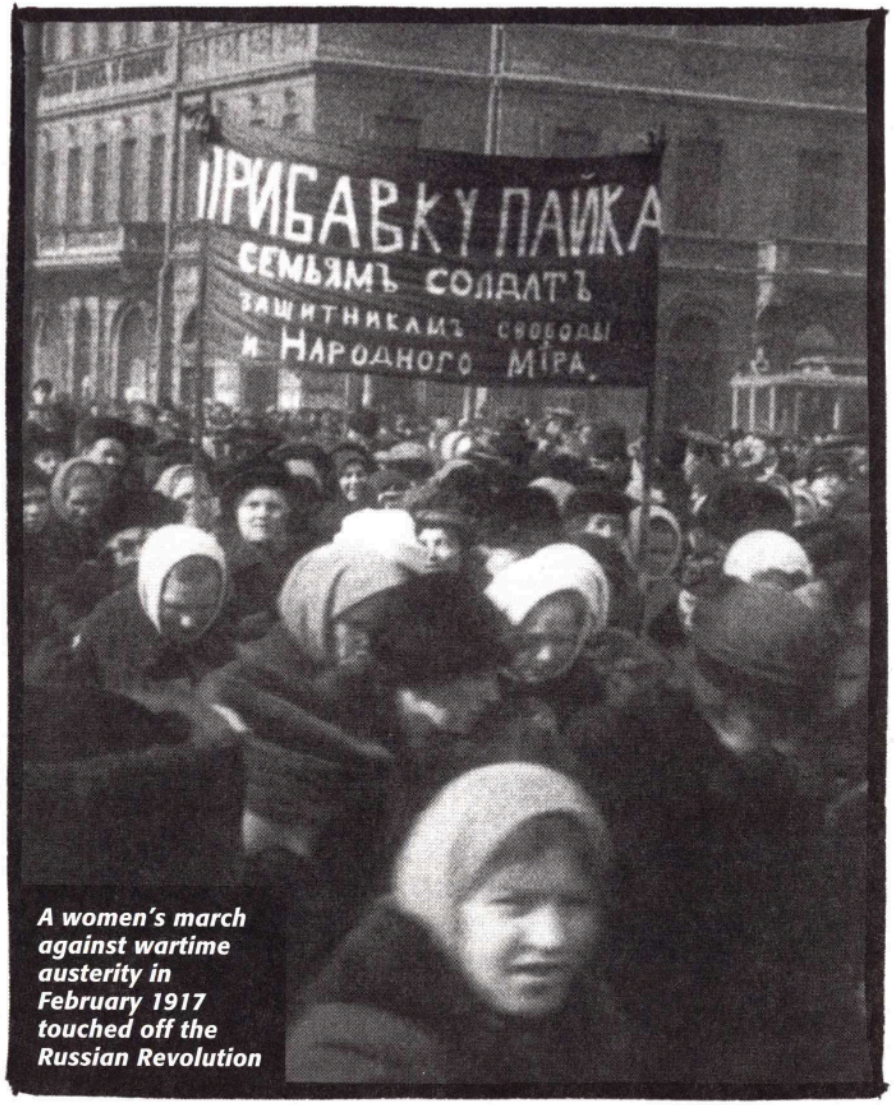
It is no coincidence that the very first time abortion was legalized in the twentieth century was after the Russian Revolution in 1917, the first revolution that brought the working class to power. Even though the revolution lasted only a few years, it showed that a government run by workers in their own interest could make women's liberation a reality. The Russian workers' state immediately declared women to be the equals of men—and granted women full legal rights. Thus, the Russian Revolution became the first society to grant women the right to vote and to run for public office.

Repressive divorce laws were replaced by new legislation granting divorce at the request of either partner. Laws prohibiting homosexuality were removed from the books. Abortion was viewed as what it is—a health matter—and was declared both free and legal.

Post-revolutionary Russia faced real problems of scarcity due to the backwardness of the country's economy, coupled with the invasion of troops from 14 capitalist nations intent on crushing socialism in Russia. This immersed the workers' government in civil war that lasted for two and a half years, and left Russia a devastated, war-torn country. Yet, despite these obstacles, the new workers' state made a priority of setting up communal housing, restaurants and child care centers to help free women from the burdens of housework and enable them to participate fully in building a new society.[36]

Within a decade, however, the workers' state in Russia had been destroyed. The revolution failed to spread to other more industrialized countries. Having been battered and isolated by the hostility of world capitalism, socialism in Russia could not survive with only its own resources.

Stalin's consolidation of power marked the restoration of capitalist relations in Russia, ruled by a state bureaucracy. Part of this process was, inevitably, restoring women's traditional responsibilities within the family. Once again, housekeeping and child care responsibilities fell mainly to women. Conditions like these breed



A women's march against wartime austerity in February 1917 touched off the Russian Revolution

women's oppression, and so ideas and hopes for women's liberation and equality fell by the wayside.

Today, the United States is the richest country in the world. Yet there is no accessible child care, paid maternity leave or even subsidized contraception. The lack of services and the erosion of abortion rights don't just drive down the quality of life for women. They also make life harder for the husbands, boyfriends and

fathers of these women. The fact that women continue to earn less than men brings down the wages of their male coworkers. Far from benefiting from the oppression of women, working-class men's lives are diminished as well.

The Way Forward

"Young women need to know that abortion rights and abortion access are not presents bestowed or retracted by powerful men (or women)—presidents, Supreme Court justices, legislators, lobbyists—but freedoms won, as freedom always is, by people struggling on their own behalf."

—Katha Pollitt, *The Nation*, May 1, 2000

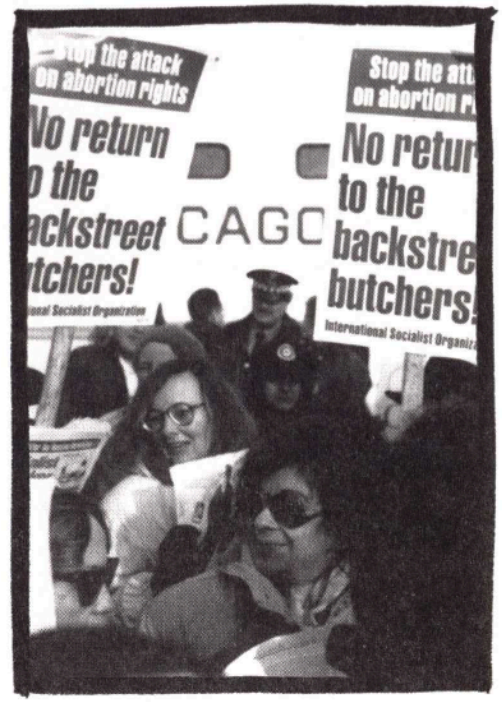
THE STRATEGY put forward by mainstream women's groups for the last decade, which relies mainly on the goodwill of elected officials, has failed. While the future of legal abortion is uncertain, one thing is clear—even if abortion remains legal, poor and working-class women will continue to lose ground. Unless we begin fighting back.

We need to mobilize and build pro-choice demonstrations whenever politicians try to pass new legislation against abortion or bigots attack clinics. We need to begin to show that the pro-choice majority is not simply going to sit by while abortion rights are chiseled away.

Even if there were an anti-abortion majority on the Supreme Court, that doesn't mean they are willing to risk the consequences of actually taking away the right to legal abortion. The last thing the Supreme Court and George W. Bush want to do is to re-ignite a protest movement like the ones that swept the country in the late 1960s. Movements like that shift the political balance in favor of women's rights, Black rights and gay rights—and help build the confidence of those struggling against the system.

That's why building a large vocal movement is exactly what can keep abortion legal. This is the most valuable lesson we can learn from the women's liberation movement.

At the same time, we need to learn from the mistakes of that movement. We have to understand why 28 years after abortion was legalized, it has been severely eroded and we have to fight the



battle again. The fact that we fought and won this reform in the past and now have to revive the struggle tells us something else.

Fighting for reforms of the system isn't enough. So long as the basic dynamic of capitalism remains intact, a tiny minority will rule at the expense of the vast majority.

Everywhere we turn, the promise of new technology and better lives is dangled before us. Yet we live in a more violent, unequal and dirtier world than before. As long as we live in a society like this one, which depends on women's unpaid labor in the home, and which uses women as a low-paid section of the labor force, then women will continue to be victimized and oppressed. Things like abortion on demand, equal pay, or accessible child care will never be available to all women. Until we actually get rid of capitalism, we'll never be able to take abortion rights for granted.

George W. Bush's advisors have devised a very clever strategy: they are conducting a frontal assault on all things liberal—from abortion rights to environmental protection—while pushing through tax cuts for the rich, so hard and so fast that they hope to sideline the opposition. Bush's program is centered around one goal—further enriching a tiny, wealthy minority at the expense of the vast majority. Bush may think he's got a winning strategy today, but he will win only if we let him. We have the power of numbers on our side, and on that basis, we can build a movement that will send his Republican program into the dustbin of history, where it belongs. When you have the majority of people on your side, as we do today, we have the power to turn the tide. We can not only beat back Bush, but we can change the world.

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